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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20520

WENEXD 12/23/77

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Dear David:

I found our discussion productive and hope to continue with you a dialogue on human rights issues of mutual importance.

Meanwhile there is a particularly tragic humanitarian problem on which we touched and about which I would like to provide you additional details. In the last two and a half years over 200,000 refugees have fled the three Indochinese countries of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Currently refugees continue to escape at high rates - over 2,500 monthly by land (mostly from Laos) into Thailand and over 1,500 monthly by sea (mostly from Vietnam) to various ports of temporary safehaven in southeast Asia.

Despite significant acceptances of Indochinese refugees by France and the United States, about 100,000 refugees remain stranded in camps in Thailand along with almost 5,000 boat refugees who are stuck elsewhere in southeast Asia who have arrived since August 11 at which time the last U.S. program for boat refugees became oversubscribed.

The situation of boat refugees is particularly precarious. In the absence of any guarantee that boat refugees will be permanently resettled elsewhere, countries of temporary safehaven are reluctant to continue to permit boat refugees to land. Thailand has commenced a policy of towing boat refugees out to sea. Other countries may follow suit. Passing merchant ships are also reluctant to pick up refugees for fear that the lack of permanent resettlement offers will make it difficult to unload the human cargo.

The Right Honorable Dr. David Owen,
Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office,
London.

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The United States is working toward an emergency measure to accept boat refugees over the next months until a long term American acceptance policy can be worked out with the Congress. In our efforts with Congress to gain a consensus on a generous long-term American policy it will be vital to show that other nations are sharing the burden and that the international community remains interested in the Indochinese refugees.

Accordingly I would ask you and your government to urgently consider two actions: 1) Immediate enactment of a monthly quota for boat refugees. Even if small, this monthly intake of boat refugees will allow the UNHCR greater leverage in trying to keep the doors open to boat refugees in countries of temporary safehaven. 2) Urge your maritime carriers to assist Indochinese refugee boats in distress as required by international convention to include picking up the refugees if the boat is unseaworthy.

The inauguration of resettlement programs by other countries for Indochinese will also have the important effect of demonstrating to the American Congress and public that the international community shares our humanitarian concern on the issue.

I am keenly aware that Great Britian has immigrants and refugees of its own with close historical ties to Great Britain. However even a small quota for Indochinese boat refugees to meet the present emergency would be very useful and of symbolic significance beyond the small number of refugees you might be able to accept. Should you decide such a small program is feasible, my staff here and our Embassies in Southeast Asia would be of all possible assistance.

I look forward to meeting with you again soon.

Sincerely,

Patricia M. Derian
Assistant Secretary for
Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs

P.S. Had a lovely carol singing evening with Margaret Peter - Hope your Christmas is/was happy.